
Key facts

- Almost all cases of slavery in Mauritania are individuals whose ancestors were enslaved many generations ago. The practice of slavery mostly exists among herders of livestock, agricultural workers and domestic servants. The workers depend completely on their “masters” to whom they pass the money they earn or for whom they work in exchange for food and lodgings.

- An awareness-raising seminar on forced labour, organized by a national trade union organization with the support of an international trade union organization, which was to have been held in Kiffa in 2001, was prohibited by the authorities.

- In October 2002, warehouse packers in the port town of Nouakchott went on strike. Ten days later they were joined by dockers in the port, who started an unlimited strike. According to the anti-slavery NGO SOS-ESCLAVES Mauritanie, the government then got the local transport police to bring unemployed people from the capital city suburbs to the docks to break the strike by intimidating the trade unionists and strikers, although the strike had been organised in accordance with the relevant legal procedures. A number of mysterious disappearances and arrests following the strike were reported.

- It is widely seen as taboo to talk about slavery and forced labour issue in Mauritania and talking about it in public and in politics is perceived as undermining national interests.

- In June 2003, the Conference Committee on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations urged the government that a direct contacts mission should take place to help the government put an end to forced labour. In March 2004 the government accepted to receive the mission in May 2004.
Special paragraph

In its report adopted by the 2003 International Labour Conference, the Committee on the Application of Standards devoted a special paragraph to Mauritania in relation with Convention No. 29 on Forced Labour, 1930. That paragraph reads as follows:

The Committee noted the information provided by the Government representative and the discussion that followed. The Committee shared the concern expressed by the Committee of Experts at the absence of legal provisions penalizing the exaction of forced labour and regretted that the mission which had been accepted by the Government had not taken place. The Committee noted the statement of the Government representative concerning the adoption at the first reading of the Labour Code and draft legislation to suppress the trafficking of persons. The Committee expressed deep concern at the persistence of situations which constituted grave violations of the prohibition of forced labour. It urged the Government that a technical assistance mission should take place in the form of a direct contacts mission to the country to help the Government and the social partners with a view to the application of the Convention. The Committee hoped that progress would be made in practice in the near future in this case. The Committee decided to place its conclusions in a special paragraph of its report.

Trade union demands

In view of the gravity of the situation in Mauritania, the Workers’ Group is demanding:

● The Government of Mauritania to acknowledge that slavery is a problem in the country and to open up the debate and let civil society address the problem openly.

● The Government of Mauritania to apply, implement and monitor the new Labour Code approved in a first reading on 2 June 2003 and to establish penal sanctions for employing forced labour, as required by article 25 of ILO Convention No. 29 on Forced Labour.

● Trade union organizations throughout the world to bear witness to the gravity of the situation in Mauritania in their international activities.

● Employers’ and trade union organizations in cooperation with the ILO to carry out awareness-raising campaigns for the population.

● The Government of Mauritania in cooperation with the social partners and the ILO to put in place assistance policies, including the development and adoption of specific economic and social programmes.

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